

THE ABORIGINES OF THE OTWAY REGION

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ABSTRACT: Local groups belonging to three distinct "tribes" (language units) occupied the Otway Region: *Djargurd*, west of Cape Otway and Pirron Yaloak, *Gulidjan*, around Colac, and *Wadjawuru*, east of Birregurra. These languages belong to three different sub-groups of the Kulinic Language Group, but *Gulidjan* and *Wadjawuru* are more closely related to each other than to *Djargurd*. Paradoxically, the *Djargurd* and *Gulidjan* were organised into matri-moieties, in contrast to the *Wadjawuru* with patri-moieties. There was some degree of marriage across linguistic and social-system boundaries.

The bulk of the small population probably occupied the coast, relying on marine and estuarine protein resources. The main inland population centres were around the lakes and swamps of the Basalt Plains region, but swamps and river-flats within the foothill forests of the Otway Region may have provided limited food resources for seasonal occupation. The forest areas were also a source of raw materials for important trade items.

The occupation of aboriginal territory by European pastoral interests between 1836 and 1847 shattered the indigenous socio-economic system. Massacres, introduced diseases and the forcible abduction of aboriginal women quickly decimated the aboriginal people of both the Otway and Basalt Plains regions.

INTRODUCTION

The aboriginal people of the Otway Region were linked by social and cultural bonds to the population of an area extending from the Upper Goulburn district to the Glenelg River. In order to understand the pre-European situation in context a consideration of the wider picture is necessary.

LINGUISTIC CLASSIFICATION, 'TRIBES' AND LOCAL ORGANISATION

The 'tribes' of most early investigators prior to A. W. Howitt (1904) correspond to the 'local groups' of modern anthropologists, or to limited aggregations of local groups which habitually camped and hunted together (vide Stanner 1965). The various local groups occupying the Otway Region can be classified into named language units on the basis of the work of Tuckfield (in Cary 1898), Dawson (1881) and Mathews (1904a,b). The units correspond roughly to the 'tribes' of modern anthropology, but they did not operate as single cultural-political entities.

The author's conclusions, derived from the original sources cited above, differ from the surveys of Tindale (1940, 1974) and Oates and Oates (1970). A detailed discussion of these differences cannot be presented here, but the most important points of disagreement are noted below. In this paper aboriginal terms in italics

are transcribed in conformity with the 'A.I.A.S. Convention for Representation of Tribal and Language Names'. Terms in quotation marks are quoted in the spelling of the original source material.

Three distinct languages were represented in the region: *Djargurd*, west of Pirron Yaloak and Cape Otway, *Gulidjan* (Gulag-ngad), east of Pirron Yaloak to near Birregurra; and *Wadjawuru* (Wadhawurung), east of Birregurra and along the east coast toward Cape Otway. These languages belonged to three different sub-groups of the Kulinic Language Group: Drual, Gulyan and Kulin, respectively (Wurm 1971). Although structurally similar, there were important grammatical and lexical differences, and the languages were not readily inter-intelligible (Dawson 1881). *Wadjawuru* and *Gulidjan* were more closely related in vocabulary than either was to *Djargurd*.

The term *Djargurd*, although derived from the name of a small aggregation of local groups centred at Camperdown (Robinson in Kenyon 1928, Tuckfield in Cary 1898) was applied in a general sense to the various dialects of the 'Mara Nation' of Howitt (1904), spoken between Cape Otway and Portland. Mathews' 'Dhauhurtwurru' is a variant form used in the Portland-Lake Condah area (Mathews 1904a). Tindale's division of these people into the 'Gunditjmara' and 'Kirrae' tribes is not accepted by the present writer

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(Tindale 1940, 1974). Dawson (loc. cit.) noted seven dialects of *Djargurd* type, of which three were found in the Otway Region: *Warn-dhalanj* 'Rough speech' in the Camperdown area, *Wirngilngad-dhalinanung* 'Koala language' in the forest country east of the Hopkins River, and *Gadabaund* 'King Parrot language' at Cape Otway. The relevant local groups and their dialect affiliations are listed in Table 1. (See also Fig. 1).

The *Gulidjan* (Gulag-ngad) people occupied the area around Colac and south into the foothills of the Otway Ranges. 'The extent of their country was a radius of 10 miles from Lake Colac except on the south, where in the extensive Cape Otway Ranges there was no other tribe'. (Murray 1853). Unfortunately no information on the *Gulidjan* local groups has been recorded. Tindale (1974) assigns part of the Otway coast to the *Gulidjan*, but Dawson and Goodall's data do not support this conclusion.

The *Wadjawuru* (Wadhawurung) language was spoken in the country between the Werribee River, Mt. Emu, the northern shores of Lake Corangamite and Birregurra, including the coast east of Cape Otway (Howitt 1904, Mathews 1904) and included the Barabool, Leigh, Buninyong and Wardy Yaloak 'tribes' of the early settlers (Murray 1853, Addis 1841). Of the fifteen recorded local groups (Parker 1844, Robinson in Kenyon 1928, Thomson 1836), two may have occupied the Otway Region: *Djeraldjur* to the west of

Lake Modewarre, and *Wadiwaru* (*Barabil*) in the Barabool Hills and south to the coast.

SOCIAL ORGANISATION

The nature of the kinship 'network' linking the Otway Region groups together cannot be reconstructed with any accuracy. However, according to Dawson, dialect exogamy was the norm, at least among the *Djargurd*; this has parallels in some other parts of Australia e.g. north-east Arnhem Land. From a wider perspective, both *Djargurd* and *Gulidjan* groups were organised into two intermarrying matrilineal moieties: *Gabadj* (Black Cockatoo: *Calyptorhynchus funereus*) and *Guragidj* (White Cockatoo: *Kakatoë tenuirostris*). This type of social system extended west to Mt. Gambier and north to Lake Hindmarsh (Howitt 1904). Patrimoieties, termed *Bundjil* (Eaglehawk: *Aquila audax*) and *Waang* (Crow: *Corvus coronoides*) prevailed among the *Wadjawuru*, in common with the other Central Victorian 'Kulin' tribes, extending in the east to Western Port and the Upper Goulburn River, and in the west to the Avoca River.

Women from as far as Lake Bolac and the Shaw River to the west came as wives to the *Djargurd* and *Gulidjan* men (Dawson 1881, Hebb 1970). In turn the *Gulidjan* intermarried with some families of the *Wadjawuru* despite the different descent system (Tuckfield 1840). The 'constant war' reported as existing between the different 'tribes' appears to have been a matter of

TABLE 1
LOCAL GROUPS AND DIALECTS, DJARGURD LANGUAGE

Local Group	Localities	Dialect	Source
Liwura or Gurngulag ? possibly including Yellingamadj	Mt. Leura, Lake Bullenmerri and Gnotuk; Lake Corangamite Lake Elingamite	Warn Warn	Goodall, Robinson Robinson
Malanggil ? possibly including Barambidj	South of Lake Purrumbete, including Mt. Pordon Lake Purrumbete	Warn Warn	Goodall Robinson
Duram	West of Curdies River (to the Hopkins)	Wirngil	Goodall
Naragurd	East of Curdies River	Wirngil	Goodall
Baradh	Sherbrooke Creek, including Browns Hill (near Princetown)	Wirngil	Goodall
Two unnamed groups	One group at the Aire River, locality of the other unknown	Gada	Hebb, Osburne

Local groups and localities from Robinson in Kenyon (1928), Goodall in Brough-Smythe (1972), Hebb (1970) and Osburne (1937). Dialect affiliation from Dawson (1881).

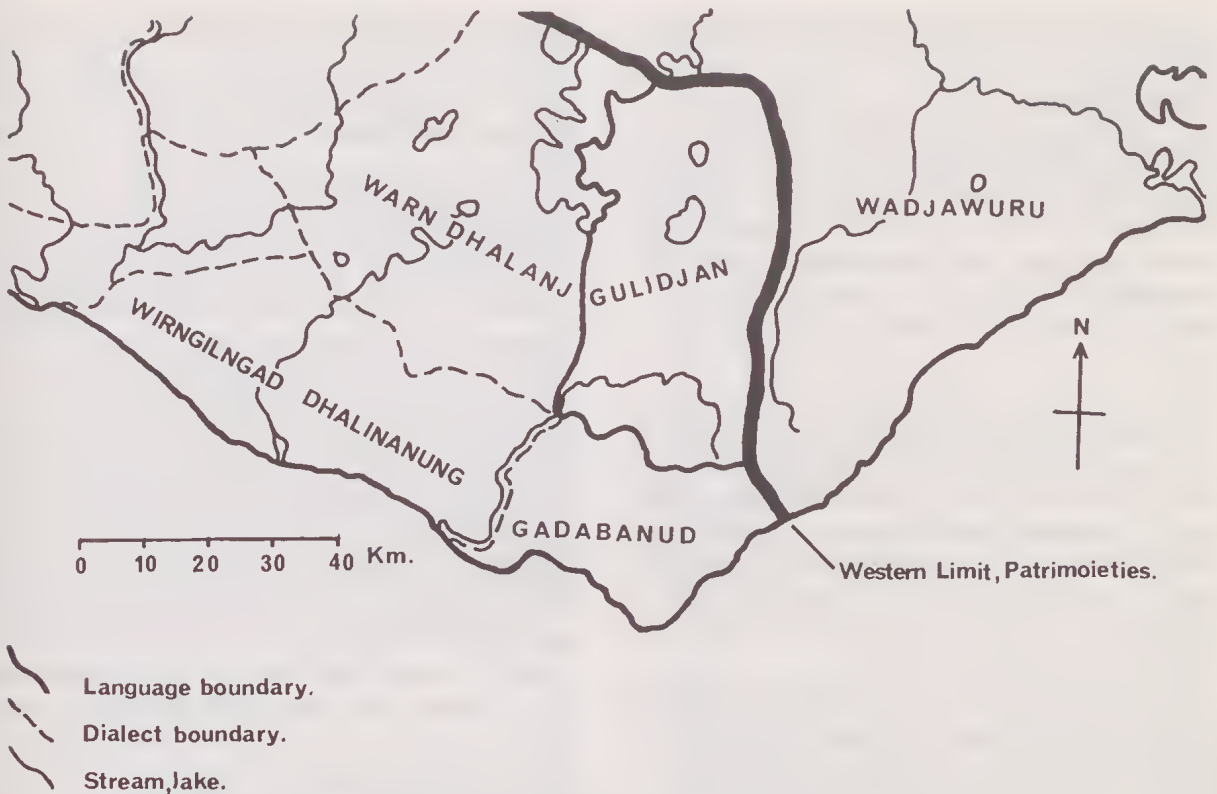


FIG. 1—Distribution of Aboriginal Groups in the Otway Region.

continuing disputes concerning marriage arrangements.

Djargurd and *Wadjawuru* men competed for wives from the *Gulidjan* — such rivalry was also a frequent source of feuds in north-east Arnhem Land (Warner 1937). Hugh Murray (1853) states that the 'Colac tribe' suffered considerably in these conflicts, and the details of skirmishes at the Buntingdale Mission (q.v.) recorded by Tuckfield (1840) tend to support his comments.

USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES

A wide range of natural resources was available within the Otway Region, although it was not a rich area in comparison to the Basalt Plains Region to the west and north.

The economy of the coastal groups was based on shellfish collection and fishing in the tidal estuaries, supplemented by plant foods collected from the land, particularly on the river flats and swamps: e.g. The tubers of Water-ribbons (*Triglochin procera*), the rhizomes of the Tall spike-rush (*Eleocharis sphacelata*), and the tubers of the Club-rush (*Scirpus maritimus* sensu lato).

There is little doubt that the bulk of the permanent population of the region would have been found along

the coast, particularly around the Hopkins and Curdies River estuaries (*Duram* and *Naragurd* local groups). No early census material is available, but there were apparently two groups at Cape Otway numbering 13 and 20 people (Hebb 1970, Osburne 1937). Assuming similar numbers for the other coastal groups the population would have been in the order of 100 to 120 people between Breamlea and Warrnambool. Seasonal visitors may have increased the numbers at times. William Buckley's accounts of his travels along the coast between Aireys Inlet and Barwon Heads certainly do not indicate a large permanent population (Morgan 1967, Wedge 1835).

The inland forest areas were probably occupied on a seasonal basis by families which spent the bulk of the year at the larger population centres, either on the coast or in the Basalt Plains Region. The more open forests and the heaths would be used most intensively, particularly around river flats and swamps e.g. Gherangamete, Irrewillipe and Chapple Vale. Massola (1966) reports archaeological evidence for such occupation. Lakes Modewarre, Colac, Corangamite and Purrumbete were centres for large gatherings of up to 150 people (Manifold 1853) but these sites are, strictly speaking, outside the region. It is difficult to estimate the actual numbers exploiting the forest areas. Robin-

son (in Kenyon 1928) states that the *Barambidy* group numbered 58 people, and the number of *Gulidjan* was only about 40 (Murray 1853), so that the numbers in the forest would be less than 100, at least in the northern section. Within the forest koala, possum and wallaby were hunted, the latter with 'dogs and spears' (Dawson 1881), and probably with the aid of extensive fires. Vegetable food was derived mainly from species from wet places, as for the coastal areas (q.v.). The main staple root foods of the plains dwellers, Yamdaisy (*Microseris scapigera*) and Pink Bindweed (*Convolvulus erubescens*) were probably of less importance.

The relatively low animal populations and difficulty of movement probably restricted utilization of the tall open forests in the wetter parts of the Ranges. However the utilization of the pith of tree ferns as a carbohydrate source is reported from other areas of Victoria, and aboriginal groups may have deliberately penetrated the forests to exploit stands of these species. Camp sites at Gellibrand and a burial cave near Barramunga (Massola 1966) support this possibility.

The forests also supplied raw materials for important implements. James Dawson (1881) mentions the rare and valuable *bandid* spears (probably from *Phebalium squameum*), which were exchanged for fancy *malin* spears from the interior (NW. Victoria). Grass-tree (*Xanthorrhoea*) flower stalks utilized to make *narmal*, light spears, were also traded. Seashells and red ochre were obtained from the coast. These articles were exchanged for others at the great meetings at Mt. Noorat. Buckley stated that *dealwark* firesticks were used by the *Wadjawuru* (Morgan 1970); these were made of Austral Mulberry (*Hedycarya angustifolia*), a species of the mountain fern gullies. The relatively recent discovery of a dolerite axe quarry at Gellibrand is additional evidence for the economic importance of the Otway Region in aboriginal times. (Massola 1966).

Despite penetration of the fringe of the Otway Ranges, the denser forests seem to have been regarded as 'dangerous places'. Dawson mentions that *Burdgurug*, a 'female devil' as tall as a gumtree, inhabited the top of the Cape Otway mountains, and was held in great dread by the Aborigines.

THE EUROPEAN INVASION

European pastoralists moved swiftly into the Otway Region from the initial bridgehead in the Melbourne-Geelong area. By August 1837 settlement had extended along the Barwon to the western boundary of the *Wadjawuru* (Rickett's Station near Birregurra) and by 1838 the best of the *Gulidjan* territory was fully occupied. The main centres of the *Djargurd* in the Pirron Yaloak, Purrumbete and Allansford areas were

settled between 1839 and 1840. Stations had extended along the coast to Port Campbell from the west, and to Aireys Inlet from the east by 1842. In subsequent years stations were established further into the inland foothills, reaching Forrest by 1847 (Billis & Kenyon 1932).

The initial reaction of the aboriginal people was to try to obtain as much of the novel material wealth of the Europeans as possible — iron tomahawks, food, clothing and livestock. Local groups were gathered together by messengers to share in the expected bounty (Morgan 1967, Corris 1968). Thus Aborigines well beyond the limits of settlement became involved in clashes with the advancing Europeans. The majority of the *Wadjawuru* of the Otway Region probably gathered at the embryonic town of Geelong between 1836 and 1837, while *Gulidjan* and *Djargurd* groups began to raid the new stations, initially in the Birregurra area, and later at Colac (Lloyd 1862, Murray 1853, McLeod 1853). Armed parties of settlers pursued the raiding parties and violent clashes followed. Inevitably the Aborigines were defeated and their weapons, rugs and huts destroyed. The Stony Rises at Pirron Yaloak were used as refuge following such raids, as it was difficult terrain for the mounted settlers. Initially the settlers exercised a degree of restraint, but in 1839 a new phase began, involving brutal massacres of entire camps. A desperate struggle developed on the Basalt Plains west of Lake Corangamite. Doubtless the *Djargurd* people of the Otway Region were drawn into the fighting, but information on this point is lacking. In the east, as the squatters pushed along the Barwon south of Birregurra, Aborigines from the Otway coast began to raid the stations. In 1841, after the killing of some surveyors, one group was pursued and massacred. As late as 1847 another group from the coast was exterminated at the mouth of the Aire River in retaliation for the death of a shepherd south of Colac (Hebb 1970, Osburne 1937).

Their attempts forcibly to dispossess the settlers defeated, the Aborigines found their hunting-and-gathering curtailed by both direct intervention and the alteration of the environment by grazing stock. Rev. Joseph Orton (1839) commented at Colac: 'Poor creatures the settlers have driven them to a state of starvation so far as their natural food goes. The kangaroo has abandoned the spot — the root on which they feed has been destroyed by the sheep and placed in this destitute state the settlers (as one did today) call them a great nuisance.' The Wesleyan Mission at Buntingdale south of Birregurra, established in 1839, failed to halt the destruction of the aboriginal people. There was fighting between the disparate groups gathered together there, and the Aborigines refused to adopt the settled and orderly life-style required of them by Rev.

Tuckfield. On surrounding stations the Aborigines were harassed: ' . . . they are driven from this favoured haunt and from that other favoured haunt and threatened if they do not leave immediately they will be lodged in gaol or shot.' (Tuckfield 1840). Aboriginal women were abducted and prostituted (Tuckfield 1841), and venereal disease spread rapidly resulting in death or sterility (Hurst 1841, Corris 1968). The same pattern of depopulation doubtless applied to the western part of the Otway Region, but specific information is lacking.

By 1857 only 16 *Gulidjan* survived (Corris 1968), and a census five years later showed 51 *Djargurd* living west of the Hopkins at Allansford ('Tooram') and Camperdown (Osborne 1937). Framlingham Mission Station (est. 1864) finally became the home of many of the remaining aboriginal people, particularly after 1879, although a number of old people refused to abandon their traditional country. At present Framlingham is the only part of Western Victoria remaining in the hands of the original inhabitants.

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